Defending castles

The ways in which castles were built changed to make it easier to defend them. Because castles with square towers had weak spots at the corners that could be destroyed by siege mining, round towers began to be constructed instead. Moats (deep channels of water around the castle) made tunneling under the castle walls much more difficult. Concentric (circular) castles built from the 1220s had two sets of walls. The inner walls were higher than the outer walls, which meant that defenders could fire arrows onto attackers. Walkways with trapdoors were built along the top of the castle walls, allowing defenders to drop stones down onto attackers. Greek fire (burning oil mixed with resin, sulphur and pitch or tar) was also used to stop attackers. By the 1500s the use of gunpowder meant that castle walls had to be even thicker. The older castle walls could not stand up to the huge iron or stone cannonballs. This was one of the reasons why castles eventually lost their role in warfare.

Joan of Arc

Between 1337 and 1453 France and England fought a number of wars that are known as 'The Hundred Years War'. England won the majority of these wars and by 1415 the English controlled most of France, including the capital city, Paris. Joan d’Arc, who we call Joan of Arc, was a 13-year-old French girl who said that angels told her to lead the French army to drive the English from the town of Orleans. She went to the King of France and persuaded him to support her. He did and in 1429 she defeated the English. She was captured by the Burgundians who sold her to the English. Because she was a woman, the English did not put her on trial as a soldier. They found her guilty of being a witch (because she wore men’s clothes). Joan was burned at the stake when she was 19 years old.

From a report of the trial of Joan of Arc.